ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE A23

WASHINGTON POST
19 June 1986

Perle, the Soviets and the World

Architect of Arms Control Policy Explains Decision on SALT II

STAT

Richard N. Perle, assistant secretary of defense for international security policy and a principal architect of President Reagan's arms control policy, met with editors and reporters of The Washington Post last week over lunch. Much of the 90-minute discussion focused on Reagan's intention, announced May 27, to stop observing the limits of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II). Excerpts below have been substantially abridged.

Q: What should a senator do who feels strongly that administration policy is wrong? That it's wrong because they've chosen not to observe SALT II limits any more? What in your opinion does a patriotic senator do in this situation?

A: Well, I think he's in a tough position. Especially because this is a response taken not quickly but two years after the fact in response to Soviet violations, that has followed repeated entreaties by the president and others in the administration to the Russians and to the Congress. And the Congress has been absent in the whole of this period. There hasn't been a single, constructive suggestion that I can think of on how to gain compliance except for a group of liberal House members [who] wrote a letter to [Soviet leader Mikhail] Gorbachev saying these violations are intolerable . . . . So it seems to me that a responsible, conscientious senator, who disagrees with the decision the president has made, has at the same time a responsibility to consider how you obtain compliance.

Q: What fueled the president's decision or your concern? What is the problem with noncompliance?

A: Well, there are problems of two sorts. One, problems of the military sort, that have to do with the . . . systems that they have in violation of the terms of the agreement. There's a political dimension as well, and in some ways the political dimension is even more important . . . . The second new type of ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] is a serious violation [of SALT II, which allows each superpower to develop only one new ICBM], and I [predict] additional new types of ICBMs that you're likely to see sometime in the near future. So it's not just two where the treaty says one; it's like three or four where the treaty says one. Or in short, that fifth generation of Soviet ICBMs, the halting of which was said to be the single most significant achievement of the SALT II treaty, is going to take place despite the SALT II treaty, in my opinion. In other words, it is popular now to argue that while the Soviets have violated some provisions, there are others they haven't violated.

Q: Can I ask you a question about the Soviet consistency on a different aspect? What is your assessment of the series of arms control proposals Gorbachev has made in the past few months? Are we beginning to see an internally coherent Soviet position on arms controls?

A: Well, let me say explicitly that I can't, I will not comment on the most recent proposal, so I'll talk about proposals up to the most recent.

But I think the pattern is . . . the use of arms control proposals to affect opinion in Europe and in the United States—[in] the United States targeted rather more towards the Congress than the general public, and in Europe rather more toward the general public and opposition. But they have not been making proposals that are consistent with realistic and attainable arms control agreements, that move in the direction the administration has been asking for, which is significant reductions [in nuclear weapons].

If there were [an award for] bad reporter of the year, I would give it to the international press generally for their coverage of the summit. Because what everybody seemed to be saying was, it was a nice get-to-know-you occasion, but nothing of consequence happened. And I think that's not true. And in particular, the language in the communique that dealt with arms control [which Perle helped negotiate] called for early progress in areas where there is common ground—and this was subject to hours of discussion, including, in particular, the concept of 50 percent reductions in offensive forces . . . . Now, what that summit agreement meant was an emphasis on offensive forces, which had been the American position all along, and it was a sizable victory for the president. If you believe that pronouncements at that [level] mean something. The Soviets have since that time, beginning in January—because I think they felt crowded and uncomfortable by a direction that seemed closer to the American agenda than their own—have been introducing proposals at a furious pace that detract from that rather narrow and manageable set of objectives that I think are workable and negotiable. And they come up with grandiose proposals—total elimination of nuclear weapons by the year 2000 and a variety of other proposals . . . I think partly to get out from under the obligation . . . to look for early progress on offensive weapons. I think the Soviets have been walking away from this since the day it happened. And they've been permitted to get away with it in part because of the underreporting of the achievements [of the summit].

Q: Given that analysis, if they continue to walk away from it, would it make any sense to have a second summit, when they've undercut the primary gain of the first one? Would you reward them that way?

A: Well, I don't know that it's a reward to the Soviets to . . . have the summit. I think we ought to keep the process going, even if it doesn't produce results.

Continued

Q: Regardless of the merits or the demerits, why do it [abandon SALT II] the way you did it? Why get the allies all atwitter and people at home concerned? Why not be more clever about it? Why fling it into the face of the Russians?

A: Well, I don't know what you have in mind as a cleverer way of doing it. This president and I think this government, on matters like this, is straightforward . . . .

As for the Europeans, there was no way to make this decision palatable to the Europeans, but there is a way to make it more intelligible to the Europeans and that is by rather more detailed discussion than we've had until now about the violations—about the likely growth of forces, U.S. and Soviet, in the absence of a SALT II agreement. And I think it is fair for us to ask Europeans who don't like the decision what they would do to obtain compliance. The Europeans have a terrific record of ignoring treaty violations. The tendency to show an unjustified deference to the wisdom of this mature European diplomacy twice in this century has produced world wars. We clumsy, naive Americans so far have been doing a pretty good job of peace, at least in Europe.

Q: The military gains to the national security of the United States through the elimination of the SALT II treaty are what?

A: It's not a question of military power. I don't think there are significant gains. It's a question of whether we should continue to be bound to a treaty the Soviets are violating—especially after what the president said when he commented on this last June . . . . I think the president sent a pretty clear signal last year when he said we will not be bound with a double standard in which we comply, and the Soviets do not.

The treaty [would have] expired on December 31 [had it been ratified]. And prior to December 31, you remember, there was a lot of speculation [about] what the president would decide to do. And he deferred the decision even further . . . . It could have been made earlier. I would have preferred to see the decision made earlier. There's never a good time, but I think there have been better times probably than the present to make that decision. But having said I'm going the extra mile and we will *not* have a double standard, what does the president then do when the Soviets were totally unresponsive?

It seems to me that if there is anything that is important, it isn't [a question of] weapons one way or another on one side or the other, it is the way in which the leadership of the Soviet Union regards the leadership of the United States. And that for me is the single most important consideration.

Q: That's the purpose here? To alter Soviet behavior and alter their impression of how we behave?

A: It is to make it plain to them that when the president of the United States says, I will not be bound to unilateral compliance, I'm going to go the extra mile—when he's traveled that extra mile, he doesn't turn around and say, well, I really didn't mean it. Historically when the Soviets have gained the impression for whatever reason that they are dealing with a weak American president, it's ultimately disastrous. And I think the sense that Gorbachev has of Ronald Reagan is vital to the safety of all of us. That's the most important reason in my mind.

Q: Without this decision, the Russians might have thought Reagan is a weak president, Richard?

A: I think without this decision [by] the president, the Russians would have concluded that Ronald Reagan, who never liked the SALT II treaty first of all, [who] declared that the Soviets had been violating the SALT II treaty, was unable for political reasons to take the step to say we would no longer be bound by the SALT II treaty.

Q: What is going to make the Russians negotiate? You've got a tough president who spends a trillion dollars, you get him to the table, you get him . . . to agree to reduce our offensive arms, and six months later you are telling us that the Russians are walking away from it. Someone else might say that that is a record of total failure. [Reagan] was led along the road by people in whom he put confidence, like you, who told him if you put the pressure on, you'd get results from it.

A: You know we may fail. We can't succeed by ourselves so it seems to me incumbent upon those who talk in terms of success and failure to be precise about what will constitute a success or failure because an agreement per se is not the right test. We'd agree on that.

Q: I regard your kind of agreement you seek as a model of success. That's what I thought you were going to deliver us.

A: Well, we're trying hard to deliver it. It is made more difficult by the absence of support from the Congress, where support is vital.

Q: You realize that Congress has doubled defense spending, and you're complaining that Congress is not supportive? You're unreal.

A: We're negotiating now . . . . As you know, the support for defense spending is not today what it was in the period in which the budget was being doubled. And secondly, increasingly the Congress has been declaring itself on these arms control issues in opposition to the administration and in some cases in the manner that it supports the position the Soviets have taken in negotiations. I think this is an entirely fair point to make . . . . But in the real world of negotiations, you can't expect to move the Soviets in the direction of the position taken by the president if you have a significant element in the Congress that is passing resolutions supporting the Soviet view of it. It's just never going to happen.

Q: [The Soviets] have tested so that without too much trouble they could put 14 warheads on the SS18 [ICBM, which currently is limited to 10 warheads] . . . [Are you] saying is that if they suddenly increase or give us the impression that they have increased the number of SS18 warheads, that you would not raise that as a major issue in demanding that we respond offensively? That rather you'd come back and say that we ought to put more money in SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative] so that 10, 15, 20 years down the road, we may be able to build a defense against something that we would be facing a year or two from now?

A: I think we would be wise to shift the emphasis to defense because in general, almost independently of what specifics we may see on the Soviet side, I think that the future of additional offensive deployments for this country is likely to be difficult and controversial and the kinds of offensive weapons that are proving very useful to the Soviet Union are not very good candidates for deployment in the United States.

Continued

Q: Do you think this administration is going to get a new arms agreement that will result in the—

A: Well, I think it depends largely on two things, whether there is strong reasonable congressional support for the president's approach to the negotiations or whether the administration will not be subjected to a variety of measures . . . that reflect a deep division between the executive and legislative branches in which the positions taken by the legislature are closer to the Soviets' position than to the president's position and in those circumstances you will get a stalemate, no agreement at all.

But there's another factor, too, to be fair, and that is that there's only so much time left in this president's term and the Soviets may at some point decide that they'd rather wait and deal with Ronald Reagan's successor, whoever that may be.